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ABSTRACT

An overview of the curriculum of a college course entitled "Politics and Sex" and several strategies found to be effective in transforming students' attitudes about sexual violence are presented. The structure of the course rests on two fundamental principles, both associated with feminist theory. First, the personal is political. Second, that violence and its threat are the underpinning of all systems of oppression and therefore, the analysis of male sexual violence rests on a theoretical premise that violence and its threat is the foundation of male dominance. The strategies for teaching about sexual violence are centered on specific pedagogical objectives, such as the idea of fear as a form of social control and the prevalence of sexual violence in the culture. Teaching effectively about sexual violence involves making the focus for students both personal--that their own attitudes and behaviors are tied to the perpetuation of sexual violence--and systemic--that sexual terrorism is not accidental or coincidental but rather structural and institutional. A list of six references is included. (DB)

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Transforming Students' Attitudes About Sexual Violence

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This essay is based on fifteen years of teaching "Politics and Sex" at William Paterson College. William Paterson College is a state-supported institution with a predominately white, working class first generation college student population. "Politics and Sex" fulfills an elective requirement for the political science major and is also a general education elective. I have taught a minimum of two sections per semester (occasionally three sections to meet the student demand) with enrollments usually at the maximum of forty students per class. Before the recently instituted general education requirement, the typical enrollment in the course was 70 students per section. Many men have enrolled in the course and I would estimate that the overall percentage of male students to be about 30%.

The course has been transformed over the years and the most significant aspect of it's transformation is the curriculum about sexual violence. In addition to the amount of time that is now devoted to teaching about sexual violence, the framework of analysis and the pedagogy has been radically re-visioned. This essay will present an overview of the curriculum and several strategies which I have found to be effective in transforming students' attitudes about sexual violence.

The course rests on two fundamental precepts. First, the personal is political. This tenet of feminist theory argues that personal and intimate

experience is not isolated, individual, or undetermined, but is social, political, and systemic (Kramarae and Treichler, 1985, p. 333). Second, that violence and its threat are the underpinning of all systems of oppression and therefore, the analysis of male sexual violence rests on a theoretical premise that violence and its threat is the foundation of male dominance. Sexual terrorism(Sheffield, 1987, p. 171-189; Sheffield, 1984, pp. 3-19)--the system by which males frighten, and by frightening, dominate and control females--is the framework of analysis for the course. Sexual violence is presented and analyzed as an integrated phenomenon which involves both actual and implied violence. The roots of sexual violence is studied in the context of patriarchal ideology and misogyny. The practice of sexual violence is examined by analyzing both the incidence of actual violence against women and children and the popular culture which supports and reinforces the notion of females as sexual prey and sexual victims.

Feminist theory and methodology are key components of the curriculum and pedagogy. As Charlotte Bunch (1983, p. 249) reminds us, theory is not just a body of facts or a set of personal opinions. Theory involves explanations that are based on available knowledge and experience. Feminist methodology and teaching acknowledges that there are many forms of knowing. In the teaching about sexual violence it is important to chip away at the false barriers between the knower and the known. This approach, while not easy and requiring constant effort, is useful in engaging men in discussions which they tend to think of as not concerning or involving them. For example, men in my classes initially separate themselves from "those few men" who rape; they insist that if they are not rapists then the discussions of misogyny, aggressive masculinity, sexual terrorism, are not really about them. They come well prepared to maintain

an "objective" distance--to study something other than themselves. For women, the barriers between the knower and the known are often easier to break but with more personal anguish and pain. This occurs most frequently with the truth-telling, often for the first time, about their experiences of sexual violence and terrorism. Some, not all, of this occurs in the classroom. When it does, it is a powerful lesson for all. Feminist theory challenges us to believe women and to account for their experiences of sexual assault. As important as it is for students--both male and female--to really hear these stories, I also consider it vital that they account for them; that they do not consider their newly found empathy as an end in itself. I insist that they explain, or at least attempt to explain, the phenomena of sexual violence as well and to place the personal in the political. If, in the course of sixteen weeks, I can move students to believe women's accounts and to explain them, I feel enormously successful.

The strategies for teaching about sexual violence are centered on specific pedagogical objectives. In introducing sexual terrorism, I want to emphasize the idea of fear as form of social control. I ask the men first and then the women to identify when they have experienced personal fear. They need to specify time, place, circumstances and exactly what they feared. After everyone has participated and we have recorded the responses, we analyze the data. It is immediately obvious to the students that men's and women's fears are qualitatively, quantiatively, and contextually different. What they see is that men are rarely afraid and are almost never afraid of sexual assault. Moreover, their fears are quite specific, usually involving a place that has a reputation for violence or a specific event; for example, making the night deposit with the receipts from work. The men readily admit that it is easier to prepare themselves physically and emotionally when their fears

are specific. They are astonished, however, at the responses of the women. The women, almost exculsively and without exception, fear sexual assault and experience this fear everywhere and at anytime. I have never had a male student say that he was afraid on our campus while women often say that they are fearful of taking evening classes, or walking to the parking lot after an evening class, going to the library, etc. In one class a woman student said that while she normally jogs 3-5 miles a day she is unable to jog during the few months in the winter when the time change makes it too dark in the morning--the only time that accomodates her busy schedule. One man was aghast; he routinely jogs at night with headphones listening to rock music and never once considered it unsafe or frightening. This led to a dynamic discussion on the meaning of freedom, sexual terrorism, and the demands that the fear of sexual violence makes on women's lives. This exercise is very useful in setting up the analysis of sexual terrorism and as a reference for future discussions on implied violence as a dynamic of domination.

Perhaps the single most important message to convey in a course about sexual violence is that it is prevalent in our culture. When I teach or speak publicly about sexual violence, the most common reaction is that I must be exaggerating the data; that only a few "sick" men rape (batter, incestuously abuse, harass, etc.). The second most common reaction is that women either exaggerate (read "lie") about sexual violence or that the women did something to deserve it. Clearly these two misconceptions are interrelated. I believe, however, that one must address first the view that the incidence of sexual violence is low. There are two strategies that I use in the classroom. First, of course, is the presentation of the data. This is done through lectures and the selection of the readings and films. It is absolutely essential that

students know that source of the data. I frequently rely on FBI crime statistics for rape. Although there are some problems with their methodology, the FBI data is shocking to the students and it is difficult for them to dismiss it as biased feminist propaganda. However, the students are presented with a variety of sources from different points of view which support the view that sexual violence against women and children is of epidemic proportions in the U.S. The students are required to know the statistics and to know the source of the statistics.

Further, repeating the data is a key strategy. Often, as I recite the data I do not allow students to take notes, they must listen. Then, of course, I repeat the data so they can enter it into their notebooks. However, I integrate the data--or parts of it--in nearly every lecture and discussion. The ususal way the data is presented emphasizes the female as acted upon: "every two minutes in the United States a woman is raped." I often change this to emphasize the rapist as the actor/offender: "every two minutes a man rapes a woman." Students respond quite dramatically to these different presentations. In the former, they tell me it is easy to factor in blaming the victim; that is, they discount the data by assuming, non-consciously, that some of them are not "real" victims. In the latter, it is almost impossible to do that, they see the rapist as the aggressor. Students must come to terms with the incidence of sexual violence for only after they have done so can they begin to understand the dimensions and ramifications of sexual terrorism. No matter what explantations they offer during the course of the semester, I make them test their explanations against the data. They usually see that their explanations (just a few men rape or just a few "deserving" women get raped, etc) just don't work.

The need to come to terms with the incidence of sexual violence is linked to the second most difficult aspect of understanding sexual violence--its normalcy. Students, like the general population, believe that sexual violence is rare and that the sexual offender is "sick." Therefore, we do not have to look at ourselves, our behavior and attidudes, to understand sexual violence, it indeed is the "other." It is here that a lengthy analysis of popular culture is most useful. The strategy here is to examine those aspects of the culture that students identify with most closely: music, television, films, spring break in Florida, fraternities, bachelor parties, etc. It is essential that they confront the evidence that is a normal part of their everyday lives.

I have collected an extensive file of artifacts (many have been given to me by students) and suggest that everyone teaching about sexual violence establish an "evidence file". The evidence is unfortunately everywhere and readily accessible. In 1989, I attended a conference at a large state university in the mid-west. Upon arrival I picked up the student newspapers and the local papers. They revealed a controversy on campus involving a group of men in a dormitory who had made a list of the "top ten things to do to the bitches below" (the women who lived on the first floor). The list was shocking and graphic, depicting sexual torture of various forms. Later, I shared the list with my class and it evoked quite a response. One student wrote in his paper: "the article you read about what happened at The University of Iowa showed me that sexual terrorism is not only committed by men who are sick. It made my question--does this attitude exist on our campus? Yes, it does." An examination of the cultural evidence challenges men and women students to critically re-view what they might have otherwise regarded as harmless fun or just what we do, that is, absent of meaning.

Even as students come to terms with the incidence of sexual violence and its representation in the culture, their construction of it--particularly of rape--is vague. They often view rape as harmless unless it involves physical assault in addition to the rape. As difficult as it is, I have found that it is necessary to incorporate the personal testimony of women's experiences of male violence. A required text is Intimate Intrusions: Women's Experience of Male Violence by Elizabeth A. Stanko (1985). In it, there is a reprint of a letter to the editor of a major newspaper from a rape victim wherein she describes in vivid detail the damage done to her body as the result of a rape. This letter is disturbing to read but most effective in moving students from thinking about rape as simply unwanted sex to viewing rape as a violent sexual assault. The film, "Rape: Face to Face", produced by The National Film Board of Canada (1982) provides personal testimony of both rapists and rape survivors. Personal testimony also comes naturally from some students and myself. One male student wrote: "the things in class that really encouraged me to think and to really look at sexual violence were the personal accounts: your experience in the laundramat, the vivid accounts in Stanko. For the first time, I became emotionally involved; thinking what if this was my mother, sister, girlfriend." A female student wrote: "it really got to me when your gave your personal rape story (note: it was an attempted rape), that you actually shared that experience with the class. It meant a lot to me and at that moment I didn't see our relationship as teacher-student, but more as woman to woman; women who live with the fear of rape every day."

One of the ways for students to see the normalcy of sexual terrorism is for them to examine language. I ask the men in the class to say out loud the words that men use to refer to women. I write all the words on one side of

the blackboard. Then I ask the women to say the words that women use to refer to men and I write them on the other side. As with the excercise on fear, we collectively analyze the word lists. Students, although usually giggling throughout the recitation, no longer nervously laugh when they look at the entire board. Men have many more words for women and most of them are vicious and degrading. The list made by the women is shorter and contains many complimentary words. I ask in what context do women use the negative words and students are quick to see that for the most part women use the degrogatory words in specific contexts--usually when they are angry at a specific man or men. The students admit that men use the negative words generically and generally; there are no "mitigating" circumstances for their use. Following this exercise, a male student remarked that "even wolf-calls and dirty jokes say something about how a man feels about women. I did these things not knowing the impact of what I was actually doing." Another male said that "I learned that actions sometimes don't speak louder than words. Verbal abuse is the groundwork for physical abuse. I've realized the power that a word can carry."

Conclusion:

The key to teaching effectively about male sexual violence and transforming students' attitudes about it lies in their suspension of disbelief. The focus for students must be personal; that is, they must acknowledge the personal consequences of sexual violence and that its perpetuation is based on the attitudes, behaviors, perceptions of all of us, not just the rapists and batterers. Their focus must also be systemic. Students must come to understand that sexual terrorism is not accidental or coincidental but rather

structural and institutional. Lastly, students also must know that for meaningful, lasting changes both the personal and the systemic must be confronted.

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